

viewers a practice of looking that glances and abstracts in the movement of the camera-eye's framing and in the editing, allowing the viewer to see things from new perspectives. But he does not necessarily offer an abstract image. In this sense, his work retains ties to representational realism. Not only did this make his work less problematic from the standpoint of Soviet policies about abstraction, it allowed it to become a basis for *cinéma vérité* and *direct cinema* in the 1950s and 1960s. Directors active in these documentary film movements in France, England, and the United States placed the camera to capture spontaneous action, minimizing the interference of direction, camerawork, and editing with events as they unfolded.

It would be misleading to suggest that modernism was solely linked to left politics and revolutionary movements. Cubism, for example, did not tie political change to modernist aesthetics as Constructivism did. *Futurism*, another art movement of the period of the 1910s and 1920s, bears ties to the mentality that gave rise to a very different politics—Fascism in Italy. Most modernist movements from this period through the 1970s, however, did share the general principles of breaking with past conventions, foregrounding form over content, and attending explicitly to the language and/or materiality of the medium. Reflexivity is apparent throughout many of the movements linked to modernism in art, film, and literature from the 1910s on. This approach reaches its fullest expression in the minimalist and structural art and film movements of the 1970s.

There is a paradox embedded in the concept of the modern. Habermas explains that to be modern is not simply to be contemporary, let alone stylish or trendy. That which is truly modern, even if it breaks with its own historical past, "preserves a secret tie to the classical," even as it breaks with the classical past.⁷ Modern works of art, for example, gain meaning within their own self-enclosed canon and set of modernist principles. Modernist movements frequently operate on the basis of a kind of self-referential approach that we do not encounter in works labeled postmodern. We can thus speak of a classical modern work of art—a work that embodies the concepts and style of modern art as an historical style that is as rule-based as any classical form. To be modern is not to be contemporary, but to fit within the framework of modern art movements that began to dissipate in the 1970s. Hence, museums that emerged in the early to mid-twentieth century that called themselves museums of modern art in order to connote ideas of being up to date and cutting edge are now faced with the reality that they are devoted to historical

rather than contemporary works. These works are increasingly seen as examples of a past modernist set of principles and standards for art—principles and standards that are no longer the primary criteria for judging contemporary works of art.

Postmodernism

As we stated earlier, modernism and postmodernism both contrast and overlap with one another. There is no precise moment of transition between the modern and the postmodern, rather postmodernism intersects with and permeates late modernity. It is correct, then, to say that postmodernism describes a set of conditions and practices occurring in late modernity. Modernism and postmodernism are not concepts that are strictly period-specific. Aspects of postmodernism can be seen in the early twentieth century, and in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, aspects of modernity and postmodernism, as well as modern and postmodern styles, coexist.

The term "postmodernity" refers to the experience of living in a postmodern culture, and the upheaval of modernist principles and frameworks that involves. There are important social aspects of postmodernity that can be distinguished from those of modernity. Modernism was characterized by a sense of knowing that was forward-looking and positive, and believing one could know what was true and real as well as what was for the best in a given society. The postmodern is characterized by questioning these sorts of knowledges and the belief in progress: Do we really know that progress is always a good thing? Can we really know the human subject? How can any experience be pure or unmediated? How do we know what truth is? Whereas modernity was based on the idea that the truth can be discovered by accessing the right channels of knowledge, the postmodern is distinguished by the idea that there is not one but many truths and that the notion of pure truth is an illusion. As such, the postmodern entails a crisis of cultural authority, that is, a profound questioning of the very foundations of social structure and the means of theorizing social relations and culture.

For these reasons, postmodernism is often described as a questioning of the *master narratives* (or metanarratives) of society. A master narrative is a framework which purports to explain society, if not the world, in comprehensive terms, such as religion, science, Marxism, psychoanalysis, Enlightenment myths of progress, and other theories that intend to explain all facets of life.

Metanarratives involve a sense of an inevitable linear progress toward a particular goal—enlightenment, emancipation, self-knowledge, etc. French theorist Jean-François Lyotard characterized postmodern theory as profoundly skeptical of these metanarratives, their universalism, and the premise that they could define the human condition. Hence, postmodern theory has undertaken to examine philosophical concepts which were previously perceived to be beyond reproach or question, such as the idea of value, order, control, identity, or meaning itself. It has involved a scrutinizing of social institutions, such as the media, the university, the museum, medicine, and the law, in order to examine the assumptions under which they operate and the ways that power works within them. One could say that postmodernism's central goal is to put all assumptions under scrutiny in order to reveal the values that underlie all systems of thought, and thus to question the ideologies within them that are seen as natural. This means that the idea of *authenticity* is always in question in postmodernism.

One of the primary aspects of postmodernism is the critique of the idea of *presence*, a concept that is fundamental to the modern concept of the subject. Presence refers to an idea of immediate experience, the direct understanding of the world through one's senses and perceptions as both reliable and real. Postmodernism says that this idea of presence, or immediate experience, is a myth, and that everything we experience is mediated through language, images, social forces, etc. In other words, postmodernism asserts that there is no such thing as a pure, unmediated experience. The work of postmodern theory has been to examine these aspects of the postmodern condition and to make sense of the complexity of contemporary social interaction, meaning, and cultural production. This does not mean that all aspects of contemporary societies are postmodern, rather that they work in tension with modern aspects and other influences.

Postmodernism emphasizes ideas of pluralism and multiplicity. The idea of difference is central to postmodern thought. There is an emphasis in postmodernism on the concept of multiple subjectivities, that is, the concept that our identities consist of a variety of identity categories—race, gender, class, age—and are the product of our social relations to social institutions. This way of thinking about identity is quite different from the idea of the unified subject of modernity. Postmodernism thus has been contemporaneous with the focus on cultural pluralism and diversity. Postmodern thought has emerged simul-

taneously in dialogue with social movements of the late twentieth century that have brought to the table questions of gender, race, sexuality, and class: the civil rights, feminist, and gay rights movements. The concept of identity politics arose out of critical theories of the 1980s and 1990s that emphasized the cultural identity of authors and subjects as crucial aspects of the politics being articulated in texts. Following earlier forms of class, race, and gender-based theory including feminism, those authors working within the loose framework of identity politics brought to the fore the fundamental question of cultural difference and the question of who it is that speaks through a given text. It matters whether the subject being discussed, and the subject speaking, is male or female, black or white, Asian or Latino, gay, straight, or transgendered. In other words, these social and theoretical movements intervene in the idea that one can speak of the human subject in universal terms. With its emphasis on the differences between subjects, and by extension viewers/readers, postmodern criticism in a more general way emphasizes that images will be interpreted differently by different viewers. Some postmodern theory places an emphasis on the question of *polysemy*, the idea that texts can have many meanings.

It is not only criticism and theory that can be described as postmodern in its approach to its objects. Many postmodern image texts, be they television shows, films, or advertisements, have more than one preferred reading and may be interpreted by viewers in different ways. The idea of multiple meanings existing in one text is well illustrated in the example of *hypertext*. A concept used to describe computer texts with multiple links to various threads of a narrative or various points within a larger set of data, hypertext is emblematic of the postmodern condition in using a network model with multiple pathways rather than linear narrative to organize knowledge and information. Baudrillard introduced the concept of simulation to describe the collapse between counterfeit and real, original and copy that exists in the digitized culture of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It could also be argued that Disneyland's depiction of Main Street USA simulates a middle American street so convincingly that visitors may take their image of main-street America from Disneyland rather than from an actual small town.

Postmodernism has a very different analysis from modernism of popular culture, mass culture, and the surface world of images. While opposition to mass culture and its saturation of the world with images is one of the hallmarks

of modernism, postmodernism emphasizes *irony* and a sense of one's own involvement in low or popular culture. The forms of low, mass, or commercial culture so disdained by modernists are understood, in the context of postmodernism, as the inescapable conditions in and through which we generate our critical texts. *Appropriation*, *parody*, nostalgic play, and reconfiguration of historical forms and images are just some of the approaches used by some artists and critics of the 1980s and 1990s whose works are associated with the term "postmodernism."

Reflexivity

Earlier, we discussed the conscious ways in which reflexivity emerged as a style in modernism. The practice of making viewers aware of the means of production by incorporating them into the content of the cultural product was often a feature of modernism. Much of postmodern art and culture takes this modern concept of reflexivity further. Self-awareness of one's inevitable immersion in everyday and popular culture has led some postmodern artists to produce works which reflexively examine their own position in relation to the artwork or the artwork's institutional context.

The early work of photographer Cindy Sherman is a good example of this approach. Sherman produced a series of photographs in which she struck poses evoking actresses in film stills. These images do not reproduce particular film stills. Rather, they evoke the style of a particular moment or genre, such as the Hollywood studio film of the 1930s and 1940s. A similar strategy was used by the Los Angeles Chicano art collective, Asco. This group made "No-Movies" comprised of film stills for movies they never actually made, never intended to make—because the group lacked the budget to produce one. This fact functioned as the instigation for an ironic joke about the function of the film still, an entity that requires no *referent* or "real" film to exist. It is well known in the industry that these stills are not frame enlargements from the actual film, but publicity stills—photographs made to advertise the film in production to the press before the film is complete. Posed to look like the film itself, these images have no referent, as the film is most often not even complete at the time the still is shot.

Sherman's photographs can be seen as self-portraits that are not actually about herself, since she is always disguised and playing a role. Hence, viewers are not meant to understand these pictures as images of Sherman or of actual



film stills, but as ironic readings, deliberate imitations, and self-conscious interpretations of style, gesture, and stereotypes. Sherman's work is a response to an era of feminist modernist criticism that challenged representations of women, an era whose defining essay was that watershed in feminist film theory, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". In this 1975 essay, which we discussed in Chapter 3, Laura Mulvey argued that in classical Hollywood cinema the male position is the active viewing position, while the female position is that of the passive object of male visual pleasure. This argument launched a whole field of feminist theory about structures of identification. Feminist film critics asked some of the following questions throughout the 1980s: How do Hollywood films, as one expression of patriarchal culture, organize our looking practices in ways that render the male viewing position one of authority and pleasure, and the female position that of specular object? How do women, as objects within this gaze, identify within a position of active

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #21*, 1978